

THE BALLAD OF OLD BLUE

By Steve White

When Hershel McGriff won the inaugural Carrera Panamericana (Mexican Road Race) in a 1950 Oldsmobile 88, fellow Oregonian and car enthusiast, Gordon Hood, couldn't have been happier. His home state could now claim a native son as an international racing hero.

In 1951, the second Mexican Road Race witnessed an invasion from Europe, including a trio of cars from Scuderia Ferrari. These Italian exotics claimed the top two finishing positions, but, to the surprise of all, third place was taken by a frumpy American sedan driven by El Paso salesman, Bill Stirling.

Amazingly, Stirling's car finished a mere 15 minutes behind the winning Ferrari and just seven minutes behind the second place car from Modena. What makes this even more amazing is that this was a 2000-mile race and Stirling was a novice competing against two of Europe's finest Grand Prix and endurance drivers, Piero Taruffi and Alberto Ascari.

By late 1952, Gordon Hood was ready for a new car and excited about the latest best examples of American performance. It was September when his passion propelled him to Spencer Motors showroom in Hillsboro, Oregon, to purchase his dream car, one exactly like Bill Stirling's. It was a current-year Chrysler Saratoga two-door club coupe, minus the optional power steering. Its frumpy looks were more than made up for by its big heart, Chrysler's new hemi-head "Firepower" V8, the hottest engine of the era.

While Gordon was passionate about his new car and its wonderful attributes, he was not the principal driver. His job provided him with a company car, which served as his primary transportation. Instead, it was Gordon's wife, Millie, who got the most use from the Chrysler, doing everyday family tasks like hauling kids and groceries. Being 6 feet tall and very athletic, Millie was undaunted by the heavy steering of the big car.

The Hoods had two daughters, Lani and Meri, who grew up along with the car. Both girls learned to drive and got their first licenses in the car they dubbed Old Blue. And the family enjoyed many vacations and weekend outings in it.

Time marched on, and, in 1967, disaster struck when Old Blue was T-boned on the right side at an intersection in Eugene. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the car's passenger door and right quarter panel were destroyed. The car could have been totaled, but that was out of the question. Instead, Gordon found an old clunker and salvaged its

passenger door and quarter panel. To complete the project, the car was repainted in its original Superior Blue. And that's the coat of paint Old Blue still wears.

It was December, 2011, while surfing the Internet, that I discovered Old Blue for sale at a car lot in Bellevue, Washington. It was on consignment by the party who bought it a year or so earlier from Meri Hood-Boisen. I had passed over other Saratogas, but this was a rare club coupe and the photos were compelling. My interest was piqued mostly out of awe for the Hemi engine and the racing history.

So, I bought Old Blue sight-unseen after hearing the salesman's glowing description of her. When it arrived by truck, it was only when the driver got aboard to back her off the van that I first felt trepidation about my blind purchase. The sound was ear-splitting, like Heavy Metal music. It didn't take rocket science to know the entire exhaust system was blown out. While this was not a calamity, it made me wonder what else to expect. And I began harboring doubts about the honesty of used car salesmen.

After installing a new stainless exhaust system, I breathed a sigh of relief when the engine fired up and purred melodiously, now a symphony, not a cacophony. Finally driving the car, I found the brakes worked well, but the steering had a lot of slack. Then I noticed how the windshield was scratched and the door glass rattled around inside worn-out channel runs. Nor did the door locks work. It was then I realized there were many minor problems to address and wondered about possible major problems.

Rust was foremost among my worries, and this car being from the wet northwest, made me worry even more. So, I removed everything from the interior, including seats, carpets, door panels, and the covering in the trunk for a thorough inspection. Luckily, I soon learned that the only floor rust was on a small removable panel that surrounds the steering column and pedals.

But the passenger door was another story. That's the door salvaged from the clunker Gordon Hood used to replace the damaged one back in 1967. Peering down at the bottom from inside the door, I could see daylight. That's when I decided Old Blue needed professional attention.

Fortunately, no really major work was necessary. Restoring the door was the biggest job. We also replaced the rusted panel, the windshield glass and gasket, wind wing gaskets, window run channels and whiskers, and door seals. Some incidentals include new door locks and parking light lenses. Out of curiosity, I pulled the brake drums and was pleasantly surprised to find evidence of a recent complete brake overhaul.

Old Blue is a very sound car that was treated with tender loving care and garage-kept for most of her life. Driving her is a real pleasure. She is surprisingly quick and easily keeps up with modern traffic. Visibility is very good and she rides nicely, even though handling is typically fifty-ish. The slack in the steering and some driveline noises are still to be tackled.

To me, the car's only intrinsic downside is the "Fluidmatic" transmission. Even in 1952 this box was an anachronism, having been surpassed by contemporary Hydramatics and a myriad of torque converters with planetary transmissions. Upshifts are made by lifting off the gas pedal and patiently waiting for the clunk, which indicates the shift is completed.

Chrysler's styling in 1952 was another anachronism. By then, every other American car maker had embraced the streamlined jet-age themes that would define the 50s. But Chrysler's president, K.T. Keller, insisted that "a gentleman should be able to drive with his hat on." This, added to Chrysler's "chair height" seats, preordained tall boxy cars, rather than low sleek ones like the competition was building. But now I find virtue in Old Blue's appearance. And at old-car events I even hear compliments about Old Blue and how distinctive she is.

Of course, the big square car lacks any semblance of aerodynamic efficiency. It's like pushing a house through a gale. In light of that, it's simply amazing these cars easily broke 100 mph. Tom McCahill, the famous car editor of *Mechanix Illustrated*, found it to be the fastest American car of the day when he got one to hit 106 mph, which is why I bought Old Blue in the first place.



